



Great Power Competition: Assumptions Behind the Headlines

Rapporteur: Elizabeth Yang

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Abstract

On April 30, 2020, CNA's Strategy and Policy Analysis (SPA) program hosted an on-the-record virtual event to analyze great power competition (GPC) as a concept for US national strategy and defense planning and for what it means to compete as US policy evolves. The discussion was motivated by CNA's recent publication *Great Power Relations: What Makes Powers Great and Why Do They Compete?* The event, built on themes from our report, explored the implicit theoretical assumptions on which GPC is based, the strategic implications of what it means to be a great power, and the role of cooperation with competitors even in an era of GPC. The discussion took particular aim at how these issues converge in the arena of day-to-day competition. The event featured CNA analysts Dr. Joshua Tallis and Dr. David Knoll and the director of CNA's SPA program, Ms. Nilanthi Samaranyake.

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Cover image credit: "BLACK SEA (Aug. 16, 2019) The Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer USS Porter (DDG 78) transits the Black Sea en route to a scheduled port visit to Golcuk, Turkey, Aug. 16, 2019. Porter, forward-deployed to Rota, Spain, is on its seventh patrol in the U.S. 6th Fleet area of operations in support of U.S. national security interests in Europe and Africa." (U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class T. Logan Keown/Released)

Approved by:

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Nilanthi Samaranyake

Nilanthi Samaranyake, Research Program Director
Strategy and Policy Analysis
Strategy, Policy, Plans, and Programs Division

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Discussion Points Summary

On April 30, 2020, CNA's Strategy and Policy Analysis (SPA) program hosted a virtual event to analyze great power competition (GPC), exploring theoretical assumptions within GPC, what it means to be a great power, and the role of cooperation in US policy. The discussion took particular aim at how these issues converge in the arena of day-to-day competition, including how they factor into concepts of gray zone activities. The event featured CNA analysts Dr. Joshua Tallis and Dr. David Knoll and the director of CNA's SPA program, Ms. Nilanthi Samaranyake. Approximately 50 people attended the virtual event from across government, think tanks, and other organizations. This report summarizes key points from the discussion, including:

- Understanding the assumptions and theories behind the headlines of GPC empowers policy-makers to craft more specific supporting policies.
- Questions such as what makes a power great, and how do great powers relate to the international system, are important for formulating theories of change and competition.
- Several concepts underlying the GPC framework require greater clarity, including how to incorporate non-great powers into GPC policies and the role of day-to-day competition.
- Great power relations is a useful framing that underscores the persistence of opportunities for cooperation with great powers rivals, and potential competition with allies or partners.
- Narrative is an important component of executing strategy. As the US engages in GPC, it must also set a proactive narrative that maintains support from allies and partners.
- Policy-makers should embed gray zone policies within concepts of GPC, using such activities to support clear and consistent narratives about the nature of the competition.
- Middle powers can serve as spoilers or allies in GPC, either undermining or validating the norms and institutions of the US-led international order.

GPC Backdrop

Although GPC is at the forefront of the US national security agenda, the ubiquitous phrase often lacks specificity, as analysts deploy the term with particular frequency when discussing preparation for conflict with China or Russia. The discussants at this event noted that a conflict-dominated framing of great power dynamics misses important dimensions, including the structure of day-to-day competition, the role of gray zone activities, and even opportunities for cooperation with rival powers.

Various forms of day-to-day competition (including overlapping concepts such as gray zone operations and competition below armed conflict) are critical to a robust understanding of how GPC drives strategy and policy. Although conflict is a contingency the military must prepare for, day-to-day competition is unfolding now. Its conduct is ambiguous, but day-to-day competition tests the international rule of law and the fundamental norms that support the security and prosperity of the international order. By nature, competitors' gray zone activities are optimized to avoid triggering a response by waging incremental asymmetric campaigns towards their national interests. While any one activity is easy to dismiss, in aggregate activities executed day-to-day threaten to impose strategic gains.

Identifying great powers

US strategy is largely silent on how a power becomes a great power. This has consequences for the policies that support a strategy of GPC, as different concepts of power produce different assessments of effective countermeasures. The discussants outlined two general categories for diagnosing power status, drawing from CNA's recent report, *Great Power Relations*:¹

1. Military power—A state may be a great power through the sheer scale of its military capacity. Depending on the preferred approach, that may mean that it:
 - a. Exceeds some threshold of sufficient military strength.
 - b. Has latent capacity to build military strength (i.e., population size and economic might).
 - c. Operates some critical military capability (e.g., nuclear weapons or power projection).

¹ Cornell Overfield and Joshua Tallis, *Great Power Relations: What Makes Powers Great and Why Do They Compete?* (Arlington, VA: CNA, 2019), https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/DIM-2019-U-021755-1Rev.pdf.

2. Scope of interest—Alternatively, a state may be a great power through its position in the international system, which includes a military dimension but may also rely on either:
 - a. The stake that it has in the survival and structure of the international (and not just a regional) order.
 - b. The management role that it exercises in the maintenance of the international order.

The discussants suggested that the latter descriptions are more useful in framing the scope and stake of day-to-day competition with China and Russia. Although there are numerous ways to decide what constitutes a great power, that (often-implicit) decision will affect US engagement strategies with other nations, how the US perceives the role of allies and partners in competing effectively, and the fundamental character of the battlefield on which competition takes place. Taking a view of great powers that foregrounds the importance of the international order may change which nations rise in importance (e.g., the UK, France, Japan, even the European Union) and clarifies the importance of multilateralism, cooperation, and global norms.

The role of non-great powers

A focus on the role of great powers within the international system led the discussants to expand the scope of conversation to include the role of non-great powers in a GPC architecture. This topic is largely under-examined within GPC strategy (and is part of a broader trend in international relations policy and scholarship focusing on great powers to the exclusion of other state power dynamics). Yet major powers (e.g., the UK, France, Japan), middle powers (e.g., Australia, Turkey, South Korea), and smaller states are important constituents of the international order. As one discussant argued, the international system is partially contingent on the voluntary participation of other states seeking security and economic benefits. In the process, they institutionalize a set of rules and norms that set in place a power structure that benefits the US. Given this voluntary dynamic, and the potential for rival powers to propose alternatives, the US must ensure that competition includes compelling objectives that provide incentives for other states to remain engaged. This should be a critical dimension of the role allies and partners play in US strategy. Failing that, major and middle powers in particular can serve as spoilers in the international order if they see diminishing returns in alignment with US norms and goals. In other words, if management and stake in the order are core components of how policy-makers define great power status, the non-great powers that help lend order, credibility, and utility (and can consequently threaten its demise by defection) should be an important dimension of how leaders frame the competition.

In addition to the role of allies and partners, the integration of non-great powers into conversations on GPC also led the discussants to consider the specific place of non-great power

adversaries. These actors—Iran, North Korea, and terrorists—are mentioned explicitly in the National Defense Strategy summary,² but they are not widely addressed in the current GPC discourse. That scenario creates gaps where non-great power adversary policy is cultivated outside the US's primary strategy, leading to disconnects in leadership priorities or resource allocation.

Competition, cooperation, norms, and narratives

The role of narratives arose at several points in the discussion. Narratives are important components of waging effective gray zone campaigns. Positive narratives underscore the utility of the norms, such as rule of law, that represent both US values and those of the international order. They play a strong role in encouraging middle powers to engage in and support that order. Conversely, negative or hostile narratives can create challenging domestic considerations for the US's democratic allies and partners, or open space for adversaries to introduce countervailing agendas.

The role of narratives, and the norms they highlight, dovetailed often with comments on the nature of competition and cooperation in GPC. As noted, the discussants argued that great power dynamics are broader than competition with potential adversaries. They may also include moments of cooperation with rival great powers and moments of competition with allies or partners.

In an important point of departure from a commonly used historical analogy, the discussants noted that the US-China relationship today differs notably from the early US-Soviet dynamic, when military strategy was more easily distinguishable from economic issues. The US today exists in economic interdependence with China (and to a lesser extent with Russia), which complicates a solely competitive framing. An unmitigated competitive narrative may not be applicable in all situations, and it may complicate efforts to maintain support from some allies or partners. Consider foreign direct investments by China, which are sometimes (but not always) malign in intent, and which are often desirable for US allies seeking financial infusions. Ultimately, if the US adopts too strong a competitive stance, forcing allies and partners to

² Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge* (Pentagon: DOD, 2018), <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

choose a side, US policy-makers may not be satisfied with the result. At best, it may include “GPC fatigue,” and at worst it may result in formal defections from the US camp.

Moreover, US policy-makers have already broached cooperation with competitors as a conceptual possibility. The Joint Staff’s Joint Doctrine Note 1-19³ includes cooperation on its spectrum of competition, and existing policy includes spaces where competition and cooperation coexist. For example, at the same time that the US competes against Russian election interference or malign activities in Ukraine, it is also working with Russia on space cooperation or northwest Pacific fisheries enforcement.

Finally, the discussants considered how cooperative themes, in balance with competitive narratives, offer important options to policy-makers on non-traditional security issues. These issues, which may include counter-piracy operations, Arctic policy, or the ongoing COVID-19 response, present decision points for policy-makers. US strategy may benefit from an occasional competitive dynamic on these and other non-traditional security issues. However, an exclusively competitive approach obscures the availability of alternatives when they may be desirable.

³ Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Doctrine Note 1-19 Competition Continuum*, (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2019), https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/jdn_jg/jdn1_19.pdf.

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3003 Washington Boulevard, Arlington, VA 22201

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